A **game-specific** approach to boyhood

Die tryin': videogames, masculinity, culture is the 18th volume of the series Popular Culture – Everyday Life and is a reference book for readers interested in researching the interface between gender, videogaming and digital cultures. In contrast to other titles in the field focused on games research, the author crafts, with intelligible style, experiences of game playing combined with what he calls *haptic* theory (a materialist, political and metaphorical relationship of player to game). This approach is used to reveal how games function as cultural phenomena where through a visual/virtual medium, a game works as a game. The book is in five chapters. What follows is a brief overview that highlights the breadth of contexts and situations where masculinity is expressed and where males could survive or 'die tryin' manifesting boyhood.

The first chapter revolves around masculinities, play and games. Masculinities are unstable and fluid (but at the same time hegemonic), as there might be an increasing number of modes and technologies of action. In that line of argument, gender is being recognized as a technology that in game studies could be thought of as a subject position. This is what Burrill calls *boyhood*, a 'socially produced and expressed maleness' from which not even adult men can escape from, as they are immersed in technoculture. Games are related to a number of normatively acknowledged techno-masculine sites, such as violence, pain, sports, play, gambling, and competition. It is within this understanding of masculinities that videogaming becomes a new literacy making it possible for the 'subject to cross the divide of real and virtual' constituting the action of playing in a new 'part of the real, a part of labor, a mode of production'.

Chapter two describes both viewing and interactive practices where avatars play the most definite role. Burrill states that the digital operates as the space where boyhood and technology are performed. Indeed, the game play occurs as a performance on the screen, but this is an extension to another space, a digital one, which impersonates 'the screenic sensibilities of the games'. The avatar embodies a type of relation to knowledge and/or vision that circulates graphically in a digital space, constructing the players' own perspective taking up at the same time specific gendered subject positions. In this respect, Burrill illustrates the case of avatars adopted by default where male players are constructed in games as part of sexualized situations, and where female characters (players) are objectified. In contrast, female players are associated with discourses of motherhood denoting heteronormative narratives and structures. This

indeed produces both visual and performative gendered practices.

The third chapter discusses how sites and sights discipline the gaze of the player, especially in video arcades. Gloomy lights are the scenario where particular spatial perceptions are housed. Gaze is also structured through witnessing because 'in looking at the other … the subject seeks to see itself'. The sense of power is designed and shaped interactively as the games are observed from conflicting external and internal viewing positions (those of the player interwoven on the screen with those of the occasional and permanent spectators). From arcades, Burrill moves into the digital geography of entertainment shopping centers where product management is disguised, let us say performed, by the interactivity of spaces within endless digitalized spaces. This resonates, to some extent, with how the private space is organized at home by the – perhaps – raiding of centers of entertainment where viewing practices (e.g. zapping) are enacted.

Chapter four seeks to understand more specifically how masculinity, structure and play are intertwined in videogames. Their common axis is linked to cinema studies as games have 'rented' representative categories related to gender and sexuality. Although masculinity could be seen as 'structural' and 'dramaturgical', maleness depends in the end on the conventions of the game structure when it comes to taking up and/or representing subject positions embodied by an avatar. The free play most male players dream about is orchestrated by a programmed gaming environment embedded in redundant hierarchical systems that set up imperceptible limits to what is perceived as limitless by the players. This, however, operates maintaining a masculine order. Burrill exemplifies his point with action and adventure games where violence triggers a myriad of narratives that potentially marginalize women and minorities. The author then recommends the study not only of games and their rules but the 'rules that govern their production' because games are constituted *in situ*; they are enacted, and when this happens games produce discourses through play. Consequently, there is a need felt for a policy of game criticism.

The final chapter is devoted to examining technological practices which Burrill groups within what he calls 'digital imaginary'. Such practices are the foundational proof that constitutes not only the space of the digital but its inhabitants. One citizen is the male technohero who (re)creates sets of gendered prototypes and topics whilst struggling between 'emasculating forces of technology'. The masculine tries to exercise control, which is constantly in jeopardy as other growing queer and feminine subject positions also circulate in the cyberspace. The author points out that the digital imaginary as a space has been informed by the developments of the film industry, and uses as examples films on cyberspace where 'telepresences' and mutative selves are at stake. In response, there is tension between the movie representations of contemporary digitized societies and totalizing critiques as various male cybernetic subjectivities emerge (e.g. hypermasculine cyborgs vs bionic robots) and mutate towards the configuration of cybersubjectivity.

Arguably, the central idea of Burrill's book is the growth of the digital imaginary through the concept of play which distorts the limits involving work, leisure and playing in their own right. Therefore, the digital imaginary sustains renewed social processes where bodies (with gender as an associated technology) function as an interrelated technological interface susceptible of 'hacktivism' as a counter-discourse. Yet this poses further questions about how patriarchy (in the form of boyhood) is normalized through technology as both of them collude whilst shaping power structures.

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